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ABSTRACT

Remarks on the practice of class visitation at the college level in English courses are directed toward revealing critical weaknesses of such practice. Examples, drawn from experience, suggest that psychological damage to the instructor often results from direct classroom observation. A more successful approach to evaluation is discussed in terms of "indirection", whereby the various feedback cues utilized neither interfere with performance nor destroy professional attitudes. (RL)

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"The Waste Sad Time": Some Remarks on Class Visitation

GEORGE MILLS HARPER

WHEN I TOLD one of my colleagues I was to speak on class visitation, he reminded me of a story about one of Chapel Hill's most famous teachers and scholars, nameless here, of course. According to my informant, as the professor was approaching retirement he was reproached by his wife for never having been invited to any of his classes; so, with some fear and trembling no doubt, he agreed that she should come to one of his last lectures. The end, I suppose, is as obvious as the denouement of a TV western: according to my "irreproachable authority," the usually intrepid pedagogue "went to pieces" under the strain of what should have been a simple class visitation, and that may well have been the climactic point in the English Department's notorious aversion to visiting the classes of our young teachers at Chapel Hill. You can argue, of course, and what answer could I give, that our apocryphal professor's experience is not typical, or that it is just too unnatural — even the strongest man might quail under the demanding eye of one who has sat in judgment over his every action for forty years or more; or the disparity between fact and fancy, the lump of clay the wife saw and the god she had heard of those many years, may simply have been grotesquely horrifying to both professor and missus.

In any event, the visitation did more harm than good to our scholar, and that is my thesis. At best it can be a sad waste of time, at worst it can permanently injure a young teacher, and the likelihood is something in between — a false impression of the capacity and potentiality of a good prospect. After all, what do we hope to achieve by visiting the classes of our young teachers? (I am not, to be sure, arguing against supervision of any kind.) Although we may have a wide variety of answers to that question, some few recur repeatedly. Foremost, I suppose, is the old dogma that knowing the boss is around always keeps the clerk on his toes (it's more likely to have him on his knees, I think, but I'm digressing). Next in importance is the assumption that the observer will carry away a sheaf of notes which will enable him to teach the teacher (this may represent a form of self-indulgence to support the egos of the war-weary observers). Third is the assumption that the knowledge we gain of the young specimen in the glass will enable us to settle him in a position exactly commensurate with his talents and capacity to benefit from sage advice. And somewhere along the line, if we haven't forgotten the students entirely, is the assumption either that the class will profit from more careful instruction because the teacher is "running scared" or that it will be drawn into closer rapport with the beleaguered defender of what is no longer a castle but an operating room.

Since all of these are fallacious, in my opinion, it may be worth our time to examine the possible consequences to teachers and students as well as observers and the university as a whole. Let's begin with the boss-clerk theory.

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Frankly, I consider it ridiculous on several counts. First of all, if the graduate student teacher knows when the critic-observer is coming, he is sure to make an abnormal preparation for what is likely to be an over-formal presentation. He may even go so far as to repeat a performance of the last meeting or the week before; in any event, he will find some means of making a "dry run," and his students will need to participate in the conspiracy – youth against us age, you know. The young teacher may waste several hours and the class one – and perhaps two if our typical instructor has taken a full hour for his "dry run." If I were a statistician, I would estimate, on the basis of the average class size at Carolina, just how many hours have "gone down the drain" primarily to satisfy some critic who is more concerned with systems than results. It is amazing how much of our energy is devoted to soothing the ruffled feelings of parents whose children are studying with graduate students rather than some well-known scholar, who was probably a graduate student when the parents studied with him. And we all know, though most of us won't admit it, that in at least four cases out of five (on a conservative estimate) the student gets better instruction from the part-time instructor: there really isn't any substitute for youth, enthusiasm, and a willingness to experiment. Sometimes I think our only real task is to control the experimentation, but we should be careful indeed or we will find ourselves trying to get the young instructor to ape our own systems. In the words of a great iconoclast, "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's."

There are, of course, variations, the most popular of which is the unannounced visitation. This one is calculated to keep the poor young teacher shaking in his pants all semester and throw his class off for several days instead of one or two. Also, this procedure promises to destroy whatever rapport with the class the instructor may have been able to establish through informality and experimentation: the usual visitor doesn't welcome deviation. It should also be said, I think, that the observer is likely to be quite as embarrassed as the instructor and the class. I recall to this day one of my own experiences. The visitor announced carefully when he was coming to my class and apologized for the necessity; it was, he said, required of him as Director of Freshman English, and he was sorry. When he came, he was obviously embarrassed, and we never discussed my virtues and vices as a teacher, though he did drop the expected innocuous remark that I had done quite well, or something to that effect. What his report was I do not know, but its only significance, certainly, was satisfying a requirement. We had taken two hours or more of a distinguished man's time and virtually wasted an hour for me and eighteen students. As a relatively self-possessed man who had been a naval officer for almost five years, I perhaps suffered a minimum of embarrassment, but I can imagine more lasting consequences to instructors of less experience or different temperaments.

Let me illustrate with some students I have known. (For the record any relation to persons living or dead is purely accidental.) One of them came to us in his junior year. Graduating with honors in three years and two summers, he had been two years in graduate school by the time he was 23, and we decided that he should be given a chance to teach. But he was shy, reserved, and very soft-spoken, and I had real reservations about turning him loose with twenty omnivorous freshmen. Despite the absence of almost all the usual positive qualifications, however, he was an obviously, even dramatically, successful teacher by the end of the first semester. Both I and my assistants had heard good reports, and students were asking to get in his class for the second semester. Of course, he was a very bright, perhaps brilliant young man, and

he obviously enjoyed teaching. But can you imagine what I—or even worse, someone unsympathetic to his problems — might have done to him by visiting his class? I will venture that absolutely nothing would have been achieved, and much harm might have been done. We knew by the semester's end that he was successful. Moreover, my advice or that of any of my colleagues with firm, perhaps stereotyped convictions about how a freshman class ought to be conducted at best would have been no help to him, at worst would have done serious damage. It is worth adding that we most likely knew more about him as a teacher from students' remarks and impressions than we would have from visiting his class. In fact I am convinced that I and my assistants can by indirection find more direction out than we could by any system of visitation.

Of course, one case does not prove a point, so before I pass on let me mention two others, both of whom were "redshirted" for at least a year. One of them came to us from a small neighboring college. Very young and very talented, he flushed when he spoke or was spoken to, and you might very well have said two years ago that he would never make it. But he did, though he certainly wouldn't have if he had been over-supervised. He needed to work out his own problem. He had a strongly individualistic approach to literature and to writing which the students appreciated and responded to. Once they did, he found himself as a teacher. He was, in fact, exciting.

Another interesting case was a young man who came to us with an M.A. from a large university. Attractive and intelligent, he was disturbed over a serious problem with stuttering, and he was literally afraid that the classroom situation might prove embarrassing. We held him out two years; then after a long talk with him I suggested that it was time to "face the music" — and alone. He did, and the experiment was a great success, for him as well as his freshman class. I know because I kept up with him, but I didn't visit his classroom: indeed, I cannot imagine anything much worse for him or his class.

Although I could go on like this for the remainder of my time, I probably wouldn't convince anyone not already convinced; it is, after all, much easier to cite examples of young teachers who would *not* break into a cold sweat at the sight of the passing visitor who casts a cold eye. But there is an important point to be made: a large number of these who are in all respects intellectually and psychologically fit will gain little if anything from visitation, and we waste our time and theirs pretending to offer them our sage advice. Chiefly, I think, we visit their classes in order not to draw special attention to those we are uncertain of.

But suppose we do decide to institute some system of visitation. How will we utilize the fruits of our observation to help the young teacher? If we visit his class only once, we may well make a serious misjudgment — we will admit, I trust, that the very best are entitled to a bad day once in a while. If we visit several times, make notes of their performances, and hold conferences, how much time can we afford to devote to the system? And what people will we use for observers? Does it make sense to ask the unproductive or unpopular faculty people merely because they have more free time? The fact is, as we all know, many of the part-time instructors are better teachers, and we thereby make a joke of the system. If not these people, do we ask our most successful teachers to take time off from important tasks? In my opinion, the time necessary to conduct a meaningful system simply cannot be justified. At Chapel Hill this semester we have 58 part-time instructors. Imagine the time involved in, say, three visitations each, followed by even one conference. (Actually, one would be a mere gesture.) And, as anyone knows who has visited a

series of classes, the observer tends to confine his remarks to the same routine categories, or he works overtime to find something new and fresh to say. No matter how different the young teachers are, the observations and advice of any visitor will make them sound much more alike than they really are, and no two observers will use the same critical criteria or agree in their judgments about who is good or in fact about what constitutes excellent performance. On the very good and the very bad, to be sure, there will be agreement, but we know these people without visiting their classes, and none of our observations or advice will, I hope, effect any appreciable change.

In actual fact isn't the young instructor much more likely to be helped by observing the various techniques of his teachers than from any pearls of wisdom they might offer as a result of visiting his freshman class? As you all know, some universities have set up systems whereby the novice observes the master teacher through a one-way glass; and it has, I am told, proved notably successful in medical schools. But there is, I suggest, one best way to perform most operations, and there is no best way to teach freshmen. As my friend William Blake once said, "God forbid that Truth should be Confined to Mathematical Demonstration!"

In fact, there are as many best ways as there are intelligent people who want to convey their knowledge. I am reminded of one final illustration. Several years ago we invited a promising young Ph.D. to the campus for an interview. After he left, the full professors were almost unanimous in the smugly positive conviction that he would probably be a good scholar but never more than a mediocre teacher because he failed to impress by any of the standard criteria. Thank heaven we weren't deterred by all our sage observations; by the end of his first year with us, he was generally recognized by students and faculty alike as one of the University's distinguished young teachers. If we had visited his class two years before, anyone in this room probably would have reported that he was shy, inarticulate, undramatic, etc., etc., with little promise as a teacher; we certainly would have made him nervous; at best any advice we offered would have been unlikely to have any influence. In actual fact, now that I think of it, the same remarks might well apply to almost all the outstanding young teachers on our staff, but I won't belabor you with examples.

I am almost inclined at this point to be completely heretical and say that those who are initially most impressive are rarely the most successful teachers. All too often they rely on sophistication, appearance, verbal facility, etc. They waste too many student hours in non-essential matters, chiefly projecting themselves.

And most of us, I might remind you, frequently think too little about the time we take from the freshman by taking from his instructor. We should make ourselves available for advice, perhaps (as we do at Chapel Hill) hold small informal sessions with eight or ten beginners, but let's not flatter ourselves that we are furthering the world's work with our fancy systems. One of the prime fascinations of the profession lies in its independence. We teachers don't punch clocks, we don't tell each other how to do things. Indeed, the classroom is one of the last outposts of freedom. Some few among us — perhaps a great many — have given up luxury and financial security for the sense of intellectual power which comes from the freedom to express our convictions about man's place in the world as it is projected in literature. Let's not devise schemes which tend to destroy this freedom merely to be ingenious or different. Above all, let's be honest with ourselves: Why do we talk one minute about the hordes of students and the amount of work to be done, and then devise, the very next minute, some futile system by which we can justify to our-

selves not doing what is most important? If the young teacher knows and responds to literature and language, and desires intensely to convey his knowledge, the technique (his own personal technique) will surely come. Let us, therefore, concern ourselves with central issues, being constantly mindful, in the words of T. S. Eliot, how

> Ridiculous the waste sad time
> Stretching before and after.

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